A Systematic Approach to Graduate Writing Groups: Facilitator, First Meeting, and Feedback Structure

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Abstract

Scholarship on writing groups has long documented the benefits that grow from writers meeting regularly to share feedback, gain accountability, and encourage one another. However, some groups flounder and some flourish, and little research exists on the reasons for such failures or successes. This leaves few resources for writing group facilitators attempting to create bonds among group members, keep members on task, create accountability, counter absenteeism, and the like. The present article explains how the author, a graduate writing group facilitator struggling with these issues, drew from survey data taken from group participants and interviews with facilitators to create a systematic approach to writing group facilitation in order to improve group functioning. This new approach revealed three main factors upon which graduate groups' success hinges: 1) the role of the group's facilitator 2) the group's first meeting, and 3) the group's workshopping/feedback structure. All three factors are explored and recommendations are given for improving in each area.

As the graduate writing specialist on staff at a Midwestern university writing center, I create, coordinate, and lead a series of graduate writing groups on campus. Though a rewarding experience overall, I have seen groups both flourish and collapse and have become curious about what might lead to such successes and failures. After trying a variety of group feedback structures, collecting survey data from students, and interviewing facilitators, I believe that there are three major areas that, when maximized, increase graduate writing groups' effectiveness: 1) a trained, prepared facilitator; 2) a structured first meeting; and 3) an effective method for giving and getting feedback.

In this article, I outline my initial struggles in these three areas before offering lessons learned about how to train writing group facilitators, take full advantage of the group's first meeting, and choose a feedback structure that works well. This essay's main intent is to provide information for facilitators who might be struggling with creating or maintaining a graduate writing group.

Writing Groups in the Literature

Writing scholars and researchers have documented the many benefits of writing groups for all types of writers. Unlike traditional one-on-one tutoring sessions, writing groups harness the power of peer interaction among multiple members and offer sustained support (Phillips 1). Writing groups are, by their very nature, social and interactive endeavors. They follow a dialogic model of collaboration, challenging the dominant view of the writer as solitary, and of feedback structures as rigid and hierarchical. This way of communicating is fluid and open to multiple voices and to multiple writers' and readers' strengths (Lunsford and Ede 235-236). The act of critiquing others' work also serves as a valuable strategy for learning to write (Aitchison "Writing Groups" 914) and forces members to reflect on writing itself, which creates metacognition about the writing process (Ruggles Gere and Abbott 375).

The literature on writing groups also helps us to characterize and distinguish between types of groups. Sarah Haas has created a useful typology for writing groups, organizing them by eleven dimensions: purpose, membership, leadership, contact, time, place, frequency, length, duration, in-meeting activities, and between-meeting activities. Scholars also highlight the distinct division between writing groups inside and outside of the classroom (Highberg et al. 6). Much of the research on classroom-based groups focuses on groups at the undergraduate level. A growing body of literature also explores writing groups for students at the graduate level. Scholars note how these types of groups are often voluntary, highly variable, and embedded in a variety of contexts: formal, ad hoc, or even external to academic institutions (Aitchison "Learning Together" 83). Because most of these groups operate outside of the classroom they may be run by a variety of facilitators—writing center staff, faculty, or a fellow graduate student—or may operate without a leader at all.

Writing groups have particular benefits for graduate students. Groups can fill gaps in writing instruction at the graduate level (Maher et al. 264). They do so by improving writing group members' knowledge about genres in their discipline and helping these students become "rhetorically-savvy" writers and readers (Gradin et al. 5). In addition, groups can serve as places for graduate students to "practic[e] and communicat[e] with other external scholarly communities" (Aitchison, "Learning Together" 89).

Writing groups are also flexible. They can offer tailored support to graduate students by focusing on themes or issues pertinent to this population, such as thesis writing or writing for publication (Aitchison, "Learning Together" 83). Groups can allow members to explore the "psychological factors which influence writing practices" and can offer graduate students a way to combat the self-doubt and anxiety that often appear during the thesis and dissertation writing process (Ferguson 287). Finally, groups can help graduate students with the "successful and timely completion of [their] doctoral work" and can aid with the transition from dissertation to publication (Maher et al. 264). Writing groups can thus support students from the beginning to the end of their graduate careers.

Graduate writing groups, though very useful, are a particularly precarious endeavor. These writing groups can easily collapse and disband because they often "hing[e] on regular attendance" and on their members' intrinsic motivation to participate (Ferguson 293). Graduate writing groups can also suffer from a range of other problems, such as personality conflicts, sporadic attendance, high attrition, misaligned expectations among members, and members' inexperience with the peer review process. Only a small number of scholars have explored the ways any type of writing group can go wrong. For example, Diane George includes "dysfunctional" writing groups in her typology, and Sandra Nelson and Douglas Smith study ways to minimize conflict in groups (qtd. in Speck et al. 66). Other scholars have also briefly discussed topics such as sporadic attendance in voluntary writing groups (Fitzgerald et al. 138), underprepared instructors/facilitators (Ruggles Gere 103), lack of institutional support for groups, difficulty starting and maintaining groups, and misconceptions about writing groups' effectiveness (Starke-Meyerring 75-78). Unfortunately, this body of research on writing groups remains relatively small.

This gap in the literature on writing group difficulties is understandable. It can be a challenge to collect data and feedback from dissatisfied participants and writing group dropouts. Even when participants are willing to discuss negative experiences, it can be difficult to pinpoint exactly how a group went off course and opinions about this may vary greatly among group members. Despite these obstacles, however, I feel strongly that we must pursue this line of research more deeply. As scholars, we need to acknowledge and examine the many ways in which graduate writing groups can falter. Only by doing so can we begin to address the needs of the many facilitators and graduate students who are struggling to create and maintain their own groups.

I have chosen to add my voice to this very small body of literature because one of my own graduate groups failed to operate effectively. This led me to analyze the reasons for its dysfunction and to explore ways to lead more successful groups in the future. Three factors emerged clearly from my writing group experience and research. I discovered the important roles played by a graduate writing group's facilitator, by its first meeting, and by its feedback structure.

A Haphazard Approach and Initial Difficulties

When I began my duties as a Graduate Writing Specialist in the fall of 2013, I facilitated a thesis/dissertation writing group made up of graduate students from a variety of disciplines and different levels of study. It was a frustrating endeavor. I allowed people to join throughout the year and students attended haphazardly or simply dropped out without warning. I sensed that we had gotten off on the wrong foot without any clear guidelines or expectations, and that the way the group shared documents and feedback could use improvement. Students gave each other feedback during the group's meetings without having read anything ahead of time, which made the feedback rushed and superficial. Perhaps most frustratingly, I was unfamiliar with writing groups myself and felt unprepared to serve as the group's facilitator. I was at a loss as to how to steer the group back on course.

A New, Systematic Approach

My group was still barely limping along when, in the summer of 2014, our writing center received funding from the Office of Graduate Studies to run writing groups for graduate fellowship recipients. These were discipline-specific, face-to-face, limited-duration groups for graduate students. I spearheaded this initiative and used the opportunity to take a more systematic approach to group formation, facilitator training, and assessment. The twelve students were put into four weekly writing groups, according to their discipline, for seven weeks. Pre- and post-group surveys were created to gather data and feedback from participants. I held formal training for the three writing center graduate tutors who, in addition to myself, served as the group facilitators. The four of us met periodically to exchange ideas and thoughts, and I also interviewed each facilitator individually.

Based on our survey results and personal experiences, the facilitators and I considered this new writing group approach a success. On the post-group surveys 10 of the 12 participants rated the groups as helping them work toward their goals "very much" and

as helping them with their writing struggles. Eleven of the 12 said they would recommend a writing group to others, and many made positive comments about the experience and the groups.

Writing Group Facilitators

Because of my previous struggles as a facilitator and because writing group facilitation differs so much from one-on-one peer consulting, I did formal training with my facilitators-to-be. With their input, I created a multipronged, interactive approach to facilitation. This approach included: 1) completing a set of background readings, 2) attending a formal training meeting, 3) attending a mid-semester meeting and end-of-semester meeting, 4) checking in frequently with me, 5) sharing resources and activities with other facilitators by email or during meetings, and 6) observing other facilitators' groups, when possible.[1] This method relied heavily on our network of facilitators and was collaborative rather than hierarchical. Though I served as a mentor, the most useful elements of the approach were putting facilitators in contact with one another and giving them the opportunity to share their struggles, experiences, and ideas.

Our formal training covered as much ground as possible. We began by discussing practicalities such as setting expectations and guidelines, helping participants select a feedback structure, creating a group schedule, and administering pre-surveys. Based on the set of readings that facilitators had already completed, we also had a more theoretical discussion about the benefits of writing groups, possible pitfalls, the role of the facilitator, and group cohesion. In addition, we talked about ways to explain and model effective feedback. Lastly, we all prepared for our groups' first meetings by creating an agenda and reviewing the handouts we would give to our participants.

As the summer continued I conducted individual interviews with the three other facilitators to see how they were putting their training into practice. I was not surprised when two common themes emerged: the role of the writing group facilitator and how this role differed from that of the one-on-one peer consultant. Unfortunately, very little scholarship describes the writing group facilitator role in detail, though Fitzgerald, Mulvihill, and Dobson offer a brief description (134) and Graham, Hayden, and Swinehart discuss it in the classroom setting (7-8). When I spoke with the facilitators they all discussed the nuanced and flexible role that they had to play in their writing groups. They also stressed that they had to constantly shift from one task to another. The facilitators had to keep an eye on the clock, take the emotional "pulse" of the group, catch problems with the group's functioning, help members to troubleshoot issues, and interpret and model feedback about members' writing. Facilitator 1 remarked upon his "hybrid role" and how it seemed to be a mixture of a collaborative, co-consulting model and a more assertive teaching position. Along with the challenges they noted, two facilitators also mentioned the unexpected rewards that came with the role. Facilitator 2 highlighted the satisfying social bonds that emerged from sustained contact with the same set of students, and Facilitator 1 appreciated the in-depth view he gained of each group member's field of study. In the end, all three facilitators discovered they had an exhausting but rewarding balancing act to maintain. They had to keep things running smoothly by constantly adjusting to group fluctuations and needs. It was an extremely challenging, valuable, and dynamic experience.

The Importance of the First Meeting

The facilitators and I prepared so thoroughly in part because we knew we had to be ready for the group's most crucial meeting—its first. We hoped that setting goals, guidelines, and feedback structures from the very beginning would help create accountability and cohesion in the groups and set them up for success. We saw the group's first meeting as similar to the agenda setting portion of a writing consultation because it sets the goals and expectations among participants. It also allows members "to make a firm decision from the outset as to whether they can realistically commit to the group" (Ferguson 293). The facilitators and I discovered that members benefitted from a direct, explicit, and collaborative discussion about what the group envisioned for itself, its feedback structure, and what members expected of each other. We found that if a member missed the opportunity to participate in this active decision-making process, the group ran a higher risk of misaligned expectations. This was the case for the only student who dropped out of our summer writing group program. Though her largest complaint was that her group's initial goals were not met, she did not attend the first meeting and missed the chance to actively participate in creating those goals.

We found that there were both administrative and emotional components to the group's first day. On a practical level, facilitators provided members with an organized agenda and helpful documents. We came to the first meeting with copies of a group pledge, a document outlining different structures for members to get and give feedback, a list of writing group benefits, an article explaining how to give constructive

feedback, and a writing group pre-survey that asked members to document their expectations, writing habits, struggles, and measurable goals. The facilitators used each document as a starting point for discussion on a variety of key topics. In particular, we found that deciding upon a structure for getting and giving feedback, an attendance policy, a meeting schedule, and a list of group goals was essential. Some facilitators also circulated abstracts of each member's writing project and used a sample text to model how to give constructive feedback. We facilitators played a clearly professional role at this point: distributing documents, collecting the pre-surveys and pledges, and answering members' questions. As a follow-up we wrote up and circulated a summary of all guidelines, policies, schedules, and structures the group created together.

In addition to these administrative duties, however, the facilitators and I found we also had to attend to several significant emotional factors, which were equally important but less systematically planned and implemented. The first meeting became vital for creating rapport, comfort, and cohesion among members. This was achieved by assisting with introductions, creating ice breakers, and allowing everyone time to chat as the meetings began and ended. One of the facilitators noted how, on the first day, she served as the group's "emotional watchdog" by keeping an eye on group dynamics in order to catch problems early (Facilitator 2). Though the list of tasks for the first meeting might seem long, we found that all were important investments in the group's future.

Writing Group Structures

Of all the topics covered during the groups' first meetings we found the most important to be feedback structure. Each group chose its own particular way of giving and receiving feedback among members. For the most part the facilitators and I had to learn through trial and error what feedback structures existed as well as which worked well and which did not. Several scholars briefly describe their writing group's setup, such as academic discipline, number of members, and weekly hours met (Gradin et al. 1; Pololi et al. 64). However, few detail how the group got and gave feedback and whether this structure functioned effectively. One exception is Therese Ferguson, who lists the thematic focus of each group meeting, recommended readings, and peer-critique exercises (288-289). Other helpful resources are online guides such as "Activities for Writing Groups," which explain how to share and respond to writing.

Though at first glance choosing a structure might appear simple, we discovered the many choices involved: when to read documents, how to share materials, how to share the feedback itself, whether or not to create a workshopping schedule, how much time (if any) to spend on writing versus getting/giving feedback, and whether the group should focus on certain writing genres or topics. Each group carefully weighed whether or not to read work prior to meeting times. The groups also chose among the many options for sharing materials and feedback comments: projectors, paper copies, emails, and file sharing methods like Google docs. Group members decided whether they wanted a more formal "feedback calendar" so that members were scheduled to submit writing on certain days or if they preferred sharing on an informal, volunteer basis. Some of the groups were also open to the idea of inviting guests to teach or lecture about pertinent topics. In our natural sciences writing group, guests demonstrated how to use a popular scientific document preparation system and lectured about electronic dissertation formatting. Most importantly, each group had to decide whether or not to focus on workshopping documents together or on using the meeting time to write. The decision appeared to hinge on how much value members put on simply creating accountability for themselves or on their eagerness to improve their own writing. Most of our groups chose to mix the two structures, using half their time to write and then the other half to workshop their writing. When workshopping, members either discussed drafts together as a group or met in pairs.

Though we discovered many successful methods for sharing writing and comments, we found at least one method that impeded the smooth functioning of our groups. As with the first group I facilitated, one of our summer groups decided not to read any writing ahead of time and simply to give feedback while reading documents aloud during the meeting. The members of this group did not want to limit the number of documents workshopped and attempted to read and comment upon every member's drafts each time they met. Members later reported they felt rushed and unprepared during meetings, and the group's facilitator noted that members focused on lower order concerns and failed to provide one another with thoughtful and useful analysis. Consequently, the group lost a member and received more negative survey results than the others. At the end of the summer all of the writing group facilitators decided not to offer this feedback structure as a possibility to other groups in the future.

We found that no one structure fit all groups and that group members could be infinitely creative when choosing how, when, and whether to give and receive feedback. By the end of the summer, we were

convinced that graduate writing groups could function within a wide array of structures as long as members were clear on the possibilities available to them and agreed on one together.

Conclusion

Since the summer of 2014, we have greatly expanded our graduate writing groups program. We have run 59 groups, and I have trained 34 facilitators. We continue to offer several discipline-specific groups each semester and have also created groups specifically for multilingual students. Additionally, we have established "accountability" groups which allow students to use the entire meeting time to write. I continue to hone our graduate writing group facilitator training program, relying heavily on our experienced facilitators. The lessons we learned in our first summer about the role of the facilitator, the first meeting, and feedback structures still hold remarkably true today.

Because of the constantly shifting nature of writing groups, we are far from finished learning about them. We find ourselves caught in a fascinating and likely unending cycle of observation, reflection, implementation, and adjustment. As constant works in progress, our graduate writing groups continue to create joy and satisfaction, as well as occasional frustration, for our facilitators and group members. Admittedly, we still come across issues related to absenteeism, accountability, and misaligned expectations. However, we have greatly improved the overall functioning and continuity of our groups through thoughtful planning and organization. We have found that when you let a graduate writing group evolve naturally, it can easily devolve; a systematic approach, however, sets the group up for success.

As we continue our journey, I remain curious about several underexplored avenues of writing group research, such as more ways to improve attendance rates and feelings of accountability, additional methods for training facilitators, and ways to maximize group cohesion. It is my hope that, true to the collaborative spirit of writing groups, colleagues running graduate writing groups in other settings will continue to contribute their experiences, research, and lessons learned to this conversation in progress.

Notes

1. Set of background readings for facilitator training: *The 'Write' Skills and More: A Thesis Writing Group for Doctoral Students* covers benefits of groups, group logistics, group structures, and possible pitfalls. "Making a Thesis or Dissertation Support Group Work for You" offers suggestions about providing effective feedback. "Guidelines for Writing Groups" provides writing group activities. "The Role of the Facilitator," written by one of our former facilitators, gives a peer-to-peer view of facilitating groups at our institution. "Writing Groups," written by myself, gives an overview of my own lessons learned as a facilitator and a discussion of creating cohesion in writing groups.

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